

CYBERNETICS AND UTOPIAN IMAGES IN  
*TERMINATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY*

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By

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CYBERNETICS AND UTOPIAN IMAGES IN

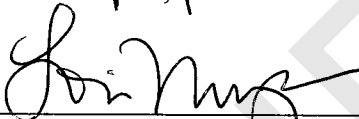
*TERMINATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY*


By

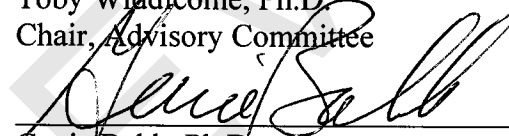
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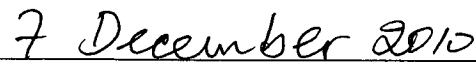
  
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## Abstract

As academic disciplines, both cyborgology and utopian studies have gained significant traction in the academy over the past fifteen years; however, rarely have these areas crossed paths in literary criticism despite the ready accessibility of a significant quantity of readily available literature. I seek to remedy this gap in scholarship by analyzing the 1991 film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* through the intersection of these two lenses. I analyze three significant types of utopian images in the film: pure human, pure machine, and a cybernetic amalgamation of human and machine. By revealing the assumptions and prejudices inherent in these images, I provide literary scholars with a route to re-investigate the relationship between humanity and machines as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy.

PREVIEW

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## **Cybernetics and Utopian Images in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day***

Cyborg. Cybernetic-organism. The melding of the organic and machinic, or the engineering of a union between separate organic systems . . . . This merging of the evolved and the developed, this integration of the constructor and the constructed, these systems of dying flesh and undead circuits and of living and artificial cells . . .

are a central figure of the late twentieth century

(Gray, Figueroa-Sarriera, and Mentor 2).

### Introduction

In 1985, Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" appeared in the *Socialist Review*. Though fictional cyborgs existed prior to the publication of Haraway's essay, Haraway claimed that real cyborgs also existed. Haraway extended the cyborg metaphor to include the vast majority of modern humanity. Her essay spawned the field of cyborgology, which studies the human-machine interactions that form cyborgs. Though cyborgology is growing rapidly, it is still a young field. As recently as 15 years ago, the publishers of *The Cyborg Handbook* believed that they had comprehensively examined cyborgology to date in a single volume (Gray, Figueroa-Sarriera, and Mentor 7). While they did cover a wide variety of topics in that volume, one area that they omitted, perhaps due to an oversight or a lack of

suitable material, was the impact of cyborgs on Utopian Studies. Unfortunately, since the publication of *The Cyborg Handbook* critics continue to largely ignore the overlap between these two fields despite a tremendous quantity of material available for analysis.

In film, for example, technology has complicated utopian and dystopian concepts for decades. Director Fritz Lang released the silent film *Metropolis* in 1926. His classic dystopia examines conflict between the working and management classes in a futuristic mega-city. John Federson, the ruler of Metropolis, uses a robot that looks like Maria, the leader of the working class resistance, in a plot to destroy any opposition to his rule. *Metropolis* is the seminal example of numerous dystopian films that explore the relationship between humanity and the machines it creates. Subsequent dystopian films such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Logan's Run* (1976) also examined the relationship between humans and technology, though technology in general and robots as a specific point of emphasis largely disappeared from dystopian films until the early 1970's. Notable films that expressly examine robots in dystopian societies include *Westworld* (1973), *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *I, Robot* (2004). Typically, critics incorrectly exclude the *Terminator* films from the technological dystopian subgenre; *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (T2) in particular offers a wealth of dystopian material. Despite the critical opportunities T2 provides, a casual viewer might dismiss the film as nothing more than an Arnold Schwarzenegger action

vehicle. Gory special effects, pithy one-liners and huge explosions all contribute to form the standard Schwarzenegger action film mold, which *T2* fits. Despite *T2*'s conformity to this mold, critics should not dismiss it so lightly. *T2* displays a broad spectrum of cybernetic utopian imagery; as such it offers a rare critical opportunity to analyze a wide variety of cybernetic utopian images within a single text.

*T2* must be framed within the meta-narrative of the *Terminator* series to properly understand the utopian imagery in the film. The plot of the *Terminator* series centers on the conflict between Skynet, a genocidal strong Artificial Intelligence (AI) from the future, and members of the Connor family. The first film of the series, *The Terminator* (1984), reveals that in the future Skynet initiates a nuclear holocaust that the few surviving humans term Judgment Day. Judgment Day reduces humanity to a fraction of its former population. John Connor leads the remnants of humanity against Skynet and its mechanical warriors. Skynet sends a T-101 Terminator cyborg back through time to kill John Connor's mother, a waitress named Sarah Connor, before John is born and, consequently, to circumvent the very existence of its strongest opposition. The adult John sends a human warrior, Kyle Reese, back through time to act as a defender for Sarah. John makes Reese memorize a message for his mother: "The future is not set. There is no fate but what we make for ourselves." The T-101 kills Kyle shortly after Kyle fathers John. After a brutal battle, Sarah destroys the T-101 in an industrial crusher.



In *T2*, the primary focus of this paper, the temporal locus shifts forward about eleven years to the early 1990's. Once again, Skynet sends an assassin back through time. Skynet's chosen killer is the T-1000, "a new model terminator composed of 'living metal,' a shape-shifting chimera that is a universal mimic, capable of taking on any identity" (Mitchell 485). The protean T-1000 targets the pre-teen John for assassination instead of Sarah. The adult John again sends a warrior back through time to serve as a protector for the cross-temporal assassin's target, but this time he selects a reprogrammed T-101 cyborg, not a human, as his guardian. Initially, Sarah does not trust the cyborg and treats it with outright hostility. As time passes and the T-101 proves its worth, she grudgingly accepts it as a functional, though unreliable, tool. Conversely, John forms a genuine bond with the T-101. Even though the T-101 is an artificial intelligence, John not only believes that it should be permitted to exist but also that he can have a positive relationship with it. While John doesn't understand the complexities or the direction of his relationship with the T-101, he still invests significant effort into building his connection to it. He interprets the message that "There is no fate but what we make for ourselves" as a message of hope: conflict with all forms of artificial intelligence is not inevitable. As such, in *T2* John works towards peaceful coexistence with AIs when appropriate opportunities arise in whatever present time he occupies.

However, the present is not temporally stable in the film. John as a pre-teen, Sarah, and the T-101 all exist in Skynet's past while Skynet's present is one of

incessant warfare against John and the human resistance. Ironically, Skynet and humanity both attempt to alter the “past” in order to improve the “future.” Neither the adult John as humanity’s avatar nor Skynet is content with the state of warfare which exists between them. Both Skynet and John seek to improve their own future by changing past events. While Skynet strives for the complete destruction of all humans, the adult John still attempts to work with artificial intelligences despite humanity’s persistent war against Skynet and its creations; for example, he sends the T-101 rather than a human back through time to protect his adolescent self.

Time travel creates a fractured temporality in the *Terminator* films, which combined with the characters’ inability to realize their utopian images contributes to the films’ exclusion from technological utopian analysis. The film’s fractured temporal spacing disguises links in the chains of actions that characters take to fulfill their utopian images. Additionally, the characters’ images never come to fruition, which also prevents ready analysis. However, just because the characters’ images aren’t fulfilled doesn’t mean that those images aren’t utopian.

A critical line from the series that frames all the characters’ utopian images is John’s message to Sarah, “The future is not set. There is no fate but what we make for ourselves.” This line is extremely utopian. His message implies that humanity controls its own destiny and that human actions can bring about a better (or worse) world. In *T2*, humanity and Skynet battle each other to determine what that better world will look like. The ways in which the multi-faceted relationships between

humans and machines influence both individuals and society as a whole supply the primary critical tensions of the film. I argue that Sarah Connor, Skynet and John Connor all have utopian images which they seek to achieve by altering the existing cybernetic paradigm though none of them thinks of their goals in specifically utopian terms. The utopian traditions to which their images belong differ; Sarah Connor and Skynet follow a blueprint model of utopia while John Connor works towards a progressive utopian model. In the first section of this paper I provide a definition for utopia and describe how cyborg theory interacts with utopian theory. Then I explore Sarah Connor's and Skynet's anti-cybernetic utopian blueprints. Next, I analyze the relationship between John Connor and the T-101 in a progressive utopian framework. Finally, I describe and contrast the dystopian results of Sarah's and Skynet's utopian blueprints to the hope offered by John's progressive utopian approach.

#### If a Human Meets a Machine Coming through Utopia

The T-101 is an obvious cyborg. Its body consists of living human tissue over a metal endoskeleton. The organic and mechanical components of the T-101 are grafted together to form a single hybrid entity. Cyborg taxonomy recognizes a variety of cyborgs based on factors such as composition, permanence of integration, and function. Cyborgologists Gray, Figueroa-Sarriera, and Mentor would classify the T-101 as an ultra-cyborg: "an enhanced cybernetic organism, greater in its realm than any mere machine or all-meat creature, as with soldier cyborgs" (14). The T-